

State has yet to pay Franklin County for prison expansion

By Kristi Pihl, Herald staff writer



Franklin County Superior Court Chief Deputy Cherryl Jones, and Franklin County Superior Court Clerk Michael Killian review documents Monday filed by inmates incarcerated at Coyote Ridge Corrections Center in Connell. Jones spends between seven to eight hours out of her 37.5-hour work week reviewing and responding to the files. This number is expected to increase as two new units at Coyote Ridge are expected to open by the end of the year increasing the inmate population from its current 1,937 inmates to its maximum of 2,468 prisoners.

CONNELL -- As hundreds more prison inmates have arrived this year at Coyote Ridge Corrections Center in Connell, Franklin County officials have seen an abrupt increase in county costs.

At the same time, they have yet to see one dime from the state to reimburse the county for costs related to the 2008 expansion, which added a 2,048-bed medium-security section to the 600-bed minimum-security facility.

Additional costs primarily are hitting the county's law enforcement budget, including the courts, prosecutor and clerk's offices.

And those costs only are expected to increase as the state continues to transfer inmates to Coyote Ridge from other prisons in and out of the state. The prison had 1,937 inmates last week, and by the end of the year is expected to be near its capacity of 2,648 prisoners.

Once full, the prison will double Connell's population. Franklin County Prosecuting Attorney Steve Lowe compares it to adding another city to the county, and said it's important for the state, not just county taxpayers, to share in related costs.

"The reality is Franklin County has gotten nothing," Lowe said.

While some impact money was given to Connell in 2009, the Legislature slammed its checkbook shut as it became clear the state was facing a budget deficit estimated at \$9 billion.

When the Legislature reconvenes in January to work on the 2011-12 budget, Franklin County will be back asking for impact fees.

While the county is well aware of the state's tight fiscal situation, said Franklin County Commissioner Bob Koch, "They do owe us something."

Rowlanda Cawthon, Department of Corrections spokeswoman, said only the Legislature has the power to appropriate impact money, not DOC. "We really can't predict what they will do," she said.

Jack Olson, DOC project manager for the Coyote Ridge expansion, said the department sat down with various local government agencies before the expansion was completed to prepare a list of impacts to ask the Legislature to pay for. State law doesn't require reimbursement until after the expenses actually occur, he said.

Koch said a joint study by the county and Connell in 2008 had estimated the county's one-time costs at \$2.5 million, including staff and equipment for departments dealing with criminal justice.

That wish list was trimmed substantially after negotiations between the county, Connell and DOC.

Olson said the group agreed on about \$3.8 million in total impacts to Connell, Franklin County, North Franklin School District and Franklin County Public Hospital District 1.

Of that, the county was to receive \$664,000 -- \$50,000 for a sheriff's office communication system and \$614,000 for one-time judicial impacts including staffing, Olson said.

But that money didn't make it through the Legislature last year, said Superior Court Judge Robert Swisher, who added, "I think Franklin County is getting the short end of the stick."

Connell did receive \$1.1 million in the 2009 legislative session for a new fire engine, to remodel the town's fire hall and buy a new ambulance. DOC also paid the city \$10 million for water and sewer system improvements that were needed to serve Coyote Ridge.

While county officials don't have a good estimate of additional costs caused by the prison expansion so far, they say there has been a definite increase in court filings and paperwork.

Because those inmates live in Franklin County, those cases must be handled by the county's courts.

Swisher has noted that since Coyote Ridge was expanded, prisoners have filed lawsuits against the state and prison employees.

Lowe said he also has seen an increase in criminal cases from the prison, which are investigated by Connell Police. When Coyote Ridge was a minimum-security prison with just 600 inmates, he said, his office received just one to three prison-related criminal cases a year, and those usually were escape or drug charges.

But since January, Lowe said, his office has received five prison-related criminal cases. He has 10 cases on hold now from Coyote Ridge, most of which are assaults, and has filed charges in another case.

County Clerk Michael Killian said letters from inmates come into his office daily, and his staff has to respond to inquiries for legal help and forms or send back incomplete paperwork.

He said his office had asked the state for an additional clerk and some office supplies to handle the expected workload. He now has begun tracking how much time is being spent on inmate cases so he can provide hard numbers when the county again asks for state funding.

Killian estimates the workload related to inmates so far amounts to a full day for a clerk every week, not counting time he spends on the cases. The cases also can be more time-consuming for the court and the clerk's office because the inmates represent themselves, Swisher said.

While the exact number of cases filed by inmates since the expansion isn't known, Killian said, the office didn't have that load when only minimum-security prisoners were housed in Connell.

The inmate cases also don't bring the county any revenue, Killian noted, because the filing fees typically are waived because the inmates don't have any assets.

Inmates also have the advantage of having a lot of time on their hands, which can produce claims that may appear frivolous.

For example, Killian recalled a recent case that an inmate filed against the state because guards allegedly took away a pie that he had made.

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